

In 2014, press freedom in Moldova was influenced by the country's sharp political divisions. Moldova formally signed an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) in June and held national elections in November, and media outlets generally aligned themselves with specific political parties or interests in their coverage of both events. The Audiovisual Coordinating Council (CCA) took an increasingly active role in regulating the content of television broadcasts during the year, and the concentration and lack of transparency in media ownership remained key problems.

## **Legal Environment**

The constitution and laws provide for freedoms of expression and the press, but these rights are often limited by other laws or violated in practice. A number of planned legislative improvements, including a long-awaited new broadcasting code, stalled in 2014.

Moldova decriminalized defamation in 2009, and the quantity and adjudication of civil defamation cases has reportedly improved somewhat. Nevertheless, various groups continue to file cases against media outlets in the courts, which have a reputation for being extremely corrupt. Implementation of defamation-related reforms under the 2010 Law on Freedom of Expression remained problematic in 2014, particularly in the filing of complaints, despite a Supreme Court document issued in 2012 to clarify how the changes should be applied. Local press freedom groups could not assess how many defamation cases were filed against the media in 2014, as many courts either refuse to provide the information or lack qualified personnel to respond to the requests. In July, a Chişinău court ruled in favor of Ruslan Popa—leader of the Reformist Communist Party of Moldova, a small rival of the opposition Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM)—who brought a case against Accent TV for airing allegedly defamatory information. Accent TV was ordered to pay 130,000 lei (\$9,000) in damages. Representatives of the channel as well as media experts noted a number of irregularities in the case, including the fact that Popa had not lodged the complaint within 30 days after the last broadcast of the information in question, as required by the 2010 law.

Compliance with the 2000 Access to Information Law also remains weak, as no state body has the authority to enforce or monitor implementation. Access to information remains most difficult outside the capital, especially in the autonomous region of Gagauzia. In October 2014, authorities nullified fees for accessing information on companies registered in Moldova, a move that watchdogs hailed as an important but small step toward broader accessibility.

The perceived lack of independence and politicized, opaque decision making of the CCA remained key problems in 2014 amid concerns that the government was attempting to use the council to punish critical stations. The CCA's 2012 closure of the pro-PCRM television station NIT for a lack of pluralism in opinion was upheld on appeal in 2013. The council offered a similar justification for its decision in July 2014 to suspend the Russian state-owned channel Rossiya 24 for six months, following content monitoring requested by Liberal Reformist Party lawmaker Ana Guţu. The CCA also issued fines and warnings to a number of Moldovan outlets that retransmit Russian channels during 2014.

In September, the Supreme Court upheld the CCA's 2013 enactment of a widely contested quota obliging broadcasters to fill at least 30 percent of their airtime with locally produced programming, and half of their primetime hours with locally produced programming in the Romanian language.

## Political Environment

Media outlets are regularly used to advance the business or political interests of their owners rather than objectively reporting the news. In the months preceding the November 2014 parliamentary elections, the political leanings of major television stations was apparent in their coverage of candidates and issues. Monitoring conducted by the CCA and a group of domestic media organizations showed that most private channels aligned with particular parties or interests, giving the corresponding candidates more airtime and more positive portrayals.

Four national channels—Canal 2, Canal 3, Prime TV, and Publika—showed a marked bias in favor of the pro-EU, center-left Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) throughout the campaign period, giving the party the lion's share of airtime and consistently portraying it positively. The channels are owned by the General Media Group, which is believed to be controlled by businessman and PDM power broker Vlad Plahotniuc. The channels Euro TV, N4, and TV7 were aligned with the pro-EU, center-right Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova, while Accent TV seemed to favor the pro-Russian Patria Party. Coverage by the public station Moldova 1 was relatively balanced, though at times more positive toward the pro-EU governing parties. Although regulations require broadcasters to submit a plan for electoral coverage, including a declaration of the identity of their owners, to the CCA in advance of elections, a number of broadcasters failed to include ownership information; Canal 2, Canal 3, Prime TV, and Publika were among them.

In early 2014, when the parliament returned to a building that had been renovated after suffering damage in 2009 riots, authorities prohibited the presence of journalists in the plenary hall, restricting them instead to a separate press room. Journalists accredited to the parliament and domestic media organizations, particularly the Independent Journalism Center (IJC), pressed the government throughout the year to revoke this policy, criticizing it as a violation of access and pointing out the insufficient size and facilities of the press room.

Media pluralism and the volume of locally produced programming have expanded in recent years. Television remains the most popular source of information for Moldovans, followed by the internet and radio. There are approximately 64 television channels—including five with national coverage, four of which are privately owned—57 radio stations, and 400 print publications in operation. In January 2014, in what was seen as a politically motivated move, a number of cable operators excluded three broadcasters—the opposition-affiliated Accent TV, the critical Jurnal TV, and RTR Moldova, which retransmits Russian state media—from their basic packages, raising concerns among domestic and international media monitoring organizations about the impact on media pluralism and diversity. The operators reintroduced the channels after widespread objections from the public and international observers, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Although intimidation of and physical attacks against journalists are relatively rare in Moldova, a few incidents were reported in 2014. In June, journalist and human rights activist Oleg Brega was assaulted by two masked men in Chișinău; Brega said he believed the attack was tied to his professional and civic activity. In September, the staff of the investigative newspaper *Ziarul de Gardă* received threats after publishing information about the assets and personal life of the leader of the Moldovan Orthodox Church.

## Economic Environment

There is a mix of private and public ownership across all types of media in Moldova. Five of the six most popular television stations, as well as two of the top three radio stations, are privately owned. Seven of Moldova's eight major press agencies are likewise in private hands. Ownership transparency is lacking, and the government does not effectively regulate concentration of ownership. A bill drafted by the IJC that would amend the Broadcasting Code to require stations to publish information about their owners was passed in its first reading in July 2014, but it made no further progress in the parliament during the year.

Private media remain highly dependent on financial subsidies and advertising revenue from affiliated businesses and political groups, rather than market-driven advertising and circulation revenue. Economic pressures continued to force media outlets to cut costs and shift from print to online operations in 2014.

An underdeveloped telecommunications infrastructure, coupled with high fees for internet connections, has hampered internet usage, though access is generally not restricted by the authorities. Approximately 49 percent of the population had access to the internet as of 2013. News portals and social media are popular, including social-networking platforms like Facebook and the Russian site Odnoklassniki.

*Note:* The scores and narrative for Moldova do not reflect conditions in Transnistria.